

Peace groups highlight arms issues

Primary Lessons For Activists



The critical early primary races, with massive media coverage and a large field of accessible, eager-to-please candidates, provided arms control groups with an ideal arena for a public airing of nuclear issues.

The results of these caucuses and primaries are now history, but the lessons learned there may be useful to activists in states that are preparing for their own primary contests and for the entire peace movement as it moves toward November.

Most observers agree that the movement has taken advantage of the situation—differences of opinion arise only over degree. Steve Buttry, an editor with the *Des Moines Register*, observes that while peace groups "have been making news, they haven't been dominating it." But Fred Martin with the Iowa Mondale campaign says that "groups like the Freeze and Ground Zero have been extremely active in raising the prominence of the nuclear issue—they've been out there getting to the people."

And whenever possible, to the candidates. One of Freeze Voter '84's more successful strategies is the old technique of "bird-dogging." When Ernest Hollings exclaimed during a nationally televised debate that he was "tired" of being asked about the freeze all the time, freeze organizers were delighted. "That just shows we did our job," says Kurt Ehrenberg, the group's coordinator in New Hampshire. "We got to as many public appearances as humanly possible and got them to say the same answers over and over again. It does them good."

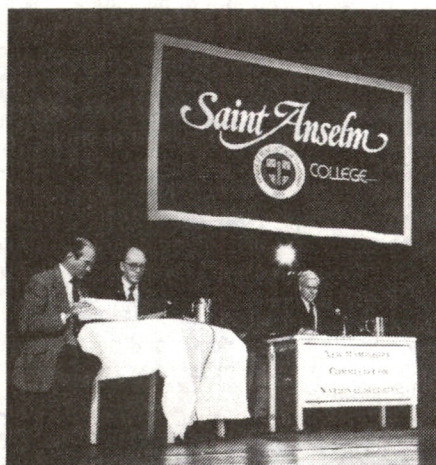
Groups have found that bird-dogging works well across state lines, too; Walter Mondale quickly turned in a long-overdue arms control questionnaire to the Iowa Freeze Campaign after being quizzed about it in New Hampshire. The freeze and other arms issues are probably "the most consistently broached subjects at any public event," says Tim Zimmermann with the Hart campaign.

While support for the freeze has been a focal point of the candidates' advertising, (except Reubin Askew's, the lone anti-freezer), antinuclear activists in Iowa and New Hampshire tried to press candidates on freeze specifics. "It's apparent that when candidates say they support the freeze, they mean very different

things," observes Randall Forsberg.

So, as a litmus test to better define gradations of commitment to the freeze, groups began asking candidates if, upon taking office, they would initiate a "quick freeze"—a unilateral halt to the testing and deployment of nuclear weapons (contingent on Soviet reciprocation). In a related campaign, Stop the Arms Race Political Action Committee, (STAR*-PAC) circulated a pledge to all the candidates for a unilateral test ban initiative. Both initiatives are receiving increasing attention by the press and public.

Media events provided opportunities not only to grill the candidates, but to bring arms control issues to the public as well. "Glenn was on a radio show, and a bunch of us called in to ask him about the quick freeze and other military policies," says freeze organizer Arnie Alpert in New Hampshire. "Half the calls were



Hollings at forum in New Hampshire

about arms issues. That's bound to make an impact."

STAR*-PAC organizer Bob Brammer points out, however, that while it is important to ask the candidates questions, groups should begin to demand pledges from them—preferably in writing.

The New Hampshire Committee on National Security was formed specifically to raise arms control issues during the primary season. Each one of their single-candidate forums—featuring every Democrat except Jesse Jackson—was open to the public, broadcast over cable television and public radio, and widely covered in the press—particularly by political columnists—across

the country. While Michael Birkner with the *Concord Monitor* notes that the candidates "did not say anything at the forums that they didn't say in other places," it is clear that the forums did add to the public discussion of arms control in New Hampshire. The success of the project, according to Scott Kirby, the Committee's coordinator, rested largely on the 25 prominent community members on its board of directors. "The fact that we are nonpartisan also helped," Kirby adds. "The candidates trusted us."

In Iowa, the major primary initiative was coordinated by the Freeze Campaign and a coalition of peace groups, which worked to get two freeze activists—one Democrat, one Republican—at each of the state's 2495 caucuses on February 20. Tim Button of the Iowa Freeze Campaign reports that freeze activists attended about 75 percent of the Democratic caucuses and around 20 percent of the Republican meetings. Practically every Democratic precinct that addressed the freeze, Button says, passed "classic freeze statements" that were offered from the floor by activists. Of the Republican precincts that took up the bilateral freeze—a packet from the state party had directed Republicans to discuss only a *unilateral* freeze—about 75 percent approved the freeze. "We demonstrated that we can mobilize people," Button notes, "and were able to expand our statewide network many fold. We will now use it for electoral work in the coming months."

During the primaries Ground Zero has been involved with the larger issue of U.S.—Soviet relations. In New Hampshire the group sponsored a radio campaign ("Next time you see a candidate for president, ask him what he will do to change our relations with the Soviet Union to make this a safer world . . ."), which cost several thousand dollars. And in Iowa, after people in 15 cities played Ground Zero's Firebreaks game, they were linked by telenet in a statewide meeting on "National Security in the Nuclear Age." (Candidates Cranston, McGovern and Hart took part in the February 10 event.) After the Iowa caucuses the group shifted its focus to Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Florida, and Georgia.

These broadly educational events can prove vital, but Tim Button warns against peace groups becoming too partisan. "In many counties, we had one caucus coordinator who worked more with the Democrats—and we'd get Republicans calling us and asking where we were. We all have to remember that this issue is not restricted to certain political parties."

—Renata Rizzo